

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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A certain community of thought has been known to instigate unprecedented results.

The Value of Privacy



I HAVE ALWAYS preferred a cell to myself. Most other prisoners regard such a situation as a punishment or a deprivation, but I place a great deal of value on privacy.

Not that my cell is designed specifically for a single occupant. Actually, it was intended for four. However, through good conduct,

hard work, longevity, and considerable conniving, I had succeeded, until now, in reserving it for myself.

The larger cell grants me space for my goldfish, my limited—though excellent—personal library, and my collection of antique bookmarkers.

All of the wardens under whom I have had the honor to serve as per-

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sonal secretary have eventually adjusted themselves to my unique situation, or at least closed their eyes.

However, now I had a cellmate.

Mike Hegan went to the window bars again and glared out at the yard. "Damn it, I'm not afraid of any man out there."

I yawned slightly as I fed my goldfish. "The warden seems to feel that you are much safer staying right here in this particular cell."

Hegan snorted. "The hell with that. I'm ready to take my chances. Nobody scares me."

I had more than a slight suspicion that Hegan was attempting to convince himself as much as anybody else. We had been cellmates for a week now and during that time he appeared to have slept very little.

by Jack
Ritchie

Until Hegan had been sent here, he had been a cop—a big, rough, tough cop who had put quite a few other people behind these walls, including—possibly—some innocents, since he had had a reputation for securing confessions, Miranda Decision or no.

Now he was just a con, like the rest of us.

I had read about his case in the newspapers in the warden's office. There had been a rash of thefts from the warehouses in Hegan's precinct and the police had seemed unable to solve or stop them. Finally, the local warehouse association, out of desperation—or possibly suspicion—secretly hired private detectives. A comprehensive investigation apparently bore fruit, for a raid upon Hegan's home, conducted by state officials, uncovered a potpourri of easily traceable loot neatly stacked in his basement, including twelve rolls of theater-aisle carpeting, thirty gallons of red barn paint, and ten cases of dehydrated onions.

I put the fish food back on the shelf. "What in the world does anyone do with ten cases of dehydrated onions?"

Hegan shrugged. "There are restaurants that ask no questions. They'll pay up to a third of the wholesale—" He stopped and glared at me. "I was framed. I didn't know the stuff was down there."

The 7:45 work bell rang and I stepped out of my cell onto the catwalk.

Hegan would remain in the cell all day.

Charlie Flannagan, one of the guards, took up his post just outside. He, or his relief, would stay there

until I returned for the day at the five o'clock lockup.

Flannagan and I exchanged good mornings and then I joined the formation marching out of the cell block.

Outside, as usual, I was permitted to proceed on my own. I crossed the main yard to the Administration Building and went up to the warden's office on the second floor.

The warden, of course, was not yet in at that early hour. He would arrive at nine.

I arranged the day's paper work on his desk and then lit one of his cigars. I read yesterday's newspapers until a quarter to nine, after which I aired the room.

At the window, I watched Warden Hathaway step out of the large front doors of the three-story Victorian mansion. Our prison is one of the last which still contains the warden's residence within its walls.

He stopped for a few moments to chat with Orville Astin, his inmate gardener and grounds keeper, and then strode across the main yard to the Administration Building. He came into the office beaming. "Another beautiful day, isn't it, Powell?"

"Yes, sir. Mild and sunny. Only a ten percent possibility of any measurable precipitation."

Hathaway sat down at his desk. "You've been looking a little tired

lately. Anything bothering you?"

I nodded. "My sleep has been somewhat sporadic since Hegan was put into my cell. It's his snoring, sir. Quite powerful."

Hathaway sighed. "I'm sorry, Powell, but you'll just have to learn to live with it. I know how you feel about your privacy, but I'm in a desperate situation. The prisoners have *sworn* to kill Hegan. Isn't that right, Powell?"

"I know absolutely nothing about that, sir."

He smiled wisely. "I've been in the prison system over thirty years and I *know* what the prisoners think and I *know* they're planning to kill Hegan. That's why I'm positive he'll be safest in a cell with *you*." He chuckled. "After all, we both know that you seem to exert a certain *influence* upon the other prisoners and I have the feeling that you would, shall we say, *forbid* anyone from killing Hegan while he is in your cell simply on the possibility that you yourself might be blamed for his death. Right?" He chuckled again.

"You already have him guarded when I'm gone from my cell, sir. Why couldn't you put him in a *single* cell and have him guarded *twenty-four* hours a day?"

Hathaway shook his head. "Do you realize how many hours there are in a week?"

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"I never really thought about it, sir."

"But *I* have. There are exactly 168. That would mean 168 *guard* hours per week to guarantee Hegan's safety, or a total time commitment of four and one-fifth guards." He shook his head. "You have no *idea* what a struggle I had with the legislature's Finance Committee in getting our last budget through. Imagine what the committee would say if it learned that I expended four and one-fifth guards just to protect *one* man? There certainly would be Old Ned to pay."

"Yes, sir. Old Ned. But couldn't you just transfer Hegan to another prison? At least that would remove the responsibility for his life from your shoulders."

"Unfortunately, this is the only prison our state has, except for the women's correctional institution. And even if I could swing it, I don't think he'd be any safer up there. I visited the place once and you wouldn't *believe* some of the women they've got committed."

At eleven o'clock, Thayer, the captain of the guards, came in somewhat breathlessly. "An attempt has just been made on Hegan's life, sir."

The warden quickly rose. "Is Hegan hurt?"

"Not a scratch. Orville Astin tried to stab him."

Hathaway blinked. "Orville? My gardener?"

"Yes, sir. He tried to get at Hegan with a pair of lawn-trimming shears. Luckily, however, he tripped over a hedge and Flannagan overpowered him."

"Where did all of this happen?"

"In your garden, sir. I felt that Hegan ought to be given some exercise and I thought he would be perfectly safe in your garden."

The warden agreed. "It would seem so. Who in the world would have suspected that Orville would try to kill him? Where is Astin now?"

"I've got him in solitary, sir."

In the afternoon, while the warden was in the dispensary conferring with the civilian director about medical supplies, I forged the necessary passes to get to Cell Block C.

Our solitary cells are rather small, with no view in any direction. However, they are clean, well-lighted, and the occupant receives exactly the same food as any other prisoner within these walls.

As usual, none of the guards went through the trouble of checking my pass. I really don't know why I bother to forge passes anymore. I suppose it's hard to break the habit.

I slid back the panel to Orville Astin's cubicle. He lay on the narrow bunk, hands clasped behind his head, smiling at the ceiling.

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"Orville," I said, "what the devil got into you, anyway?"

He sat up. "Is that you, Mr. Powell?"

"It is."

His smile broadened. "I guess everybody's talking about me now. Luckily for Hegan, I was overpowered at the last second."

"Orville, I am quite positive that you are not capable of murder."

He appeared a bit offended. "I killed my mother-in-law, didn't I?"

That was quite true. He had lethally skewered her with a shish kebab rod on an otherwise dull Sunday afternoon. His wife, forgiving him, has been waiting for his release these fourteen years, apparently unaware that he has turned down two paroles.

"I am speaking of cold-blooded murder, Orville," I said. "Hot-blooded murder is another thing. Besides, I know that you faint at the sight of blood."

"My blood, yes. Other people's, no. I'll bet no one ever expected that I would be the one to put the shiv to Hegan. Or nearly put the shiv to Hegan. They'll think of me as more than just a gardener from now on, won't they?"

I tried a guess. "According to the captain of the guards, Flannagan didn't exactly overpower you. He helped you up."

Orville's jaw became stubborn. "I

was *overpowered* by Flannagan, and when I'm overpowered, I *know* I'm overpowered. Hegan was lucky to get away alive." He resumed his smile. "This whole thing ought to get me at least another five years, shouldn't it? Could you have someone send up my seed catalogs? And my organic gardening magazines?"

I gave up. "All right, Orville."

When I returned to my cell at lockup time, I found Hegan quite pasty-faced.

His voice broke slightly. "I suppose you heard about how somebody tried to kill me?"

I nodded. "Orville Astin. He wouldn't hurt a flea."

Hegan's eyes were somewhat wild. "Wouldn't hurt a flea? He had this great big dagger."

"Lawn-trimming shears."

"Dagger. It even looked like *two* daggers to me."

After lights out, Hegan didn't get to sleep until two-thirty in the morning. I knew, because that's when his snoring woke me.

I climbed down from my upper bunk and reached for Hegan with the intention of turning him over on his side. He leaped from his bunk with a shriek and went for my throat.

I had considerable difficulty in warding him off while I hastily reassured him that it was only me and that I had no intention of harming

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him. When I lay down again, it was some time before I was able to resume sleep.

At five o'clock Hegan began to snore again and woke me up. This time I decided that it might be wiser not to disturb him. I endured the noise until the six o'clock wake-up bell.

In the afternoon when I returned to my cell, I found Hegan sitting in the extreme corner of his bunk. "Don't go near the window, Powell. They might get you by mistake."

"Who might?"

"Those buzzards out there. They're all out to get me."

"How can anybody possibly get you in here?"

"Curare," he said darkly. "And a blowgun."

"How in the world would anyone in here get curare?"

Hegan laughed bitterly. "I *know* you cons. There isn't anything you can't get if you set your minds to it."

When Hegan's food tray was brought to him, he regarded it suspiciously. "How do I know this food isn't poisoned?"

I sighed. "You're letting your imagination run away with you."

His eyes narrowed. "All right, Powell, if you're so positive it isn't poisoned, eat half of it."

"I thoroughly dislike chili."

He rose menacingly. "Eat, damn it. Eat."

I suffered considerably from heartburn that night.

The next morning a new batch of prisoners was brought to the warden's office for the orientation interviews. Among them was Albert Lochenmeyer.

Lochenmeyer had been in and out of this prison all of his life. This time his stay was going to be permanent. He had just been convicted of killing the manager of a savings and loan office while in the commission of a robbery.

I got the opportunity to talk to him alone. "I hear they gave you ninety-nine years?"

Lochenmeyer shrugged. "I always knew I'd come here someday and never get out. Now the suspense is gone and I can relax. I hear you got Hegan as one of your guests now."

"That's right."

"And he's still alive?"

"Still alive."

Lochenmeyer grinned. "Actually I never ran across Hegan professionally. I got nothing against him personal, except that he was a cop. On the other hand, I just might do something about Hegan on general principles. After all, what do I have to lose?"

"That's right," I said. "What have you got to lose?"

Yet ten days passed and Hegan remained alive, though considerably thinner and quite jumpy.

Dunlap, Sickels and I held our usual meeting in the library file room. Dunlap is the inmate in charge of the guards' mess, a position of great responsibility and opportunity. He is a rather rotund man, as befits his position. Sickels spends his workday wandering importantly around the prison power station with a slightly oily rag in the back pocket of his coveralls.

Most of the inmates refer to the three of us as the Executive Committee, a position to which we have not been elected, but grown.

We are the exponents of peace, order, light, and tranquillity, ever ready with a guiding hand for the inmate—or occasionally the guard—who might be confronted with some little problem which he felt was not quite important enough to trouble the official prison administration.

Dunlap carefully cut the pint of strawberry ice cream into three equal sections and passed around the plates and silverware.

Sickels got to the point of the meeting. "Hegan's been here almost two weeks now and he's still alive. Nobody's even made a try at him, except for Orville. But we can't really count that, can we?"

Dunlap delicately spooned ice

cream to his lips. "Everybody *talks* about killing Hegan, but nobody seems to want to do it. Do you suppose they're intimidated because Hegan's in your cell, Powell?"

I didn't think so. "If anybody really wants to kill Hegan, it would have been done by now. Let's face it, if Hegan hasn't been killed by now, he never will be."

Dunlap nodded gloomily. "But something's *got* to be done. We have a cop who's responsible for dozens of our people being in here and he's still alive. It's disgraceful."

Sickels agreed. "How long do you think a man like Hegan would last in Leavenworth? Or San Quentin? Or Soledad?" He laughed dryly. "Not twenty-four hours. Forty-eight, at the most. We'll be regarded as Hickville, U.S.A. if something isn't done about Hegan and done right away. I think that our people are looking at us, the Executive Committee, to *do* something."

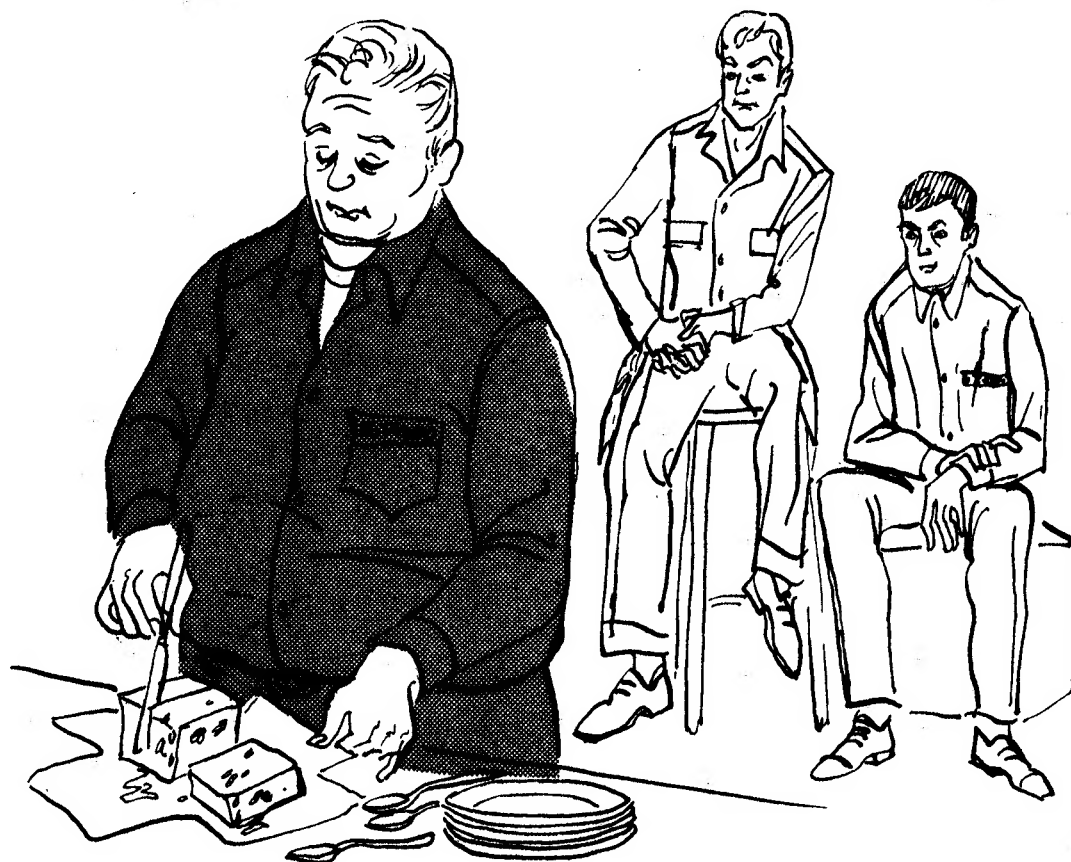
Dunlap regarded him speculatively. "Are you suggesting that one of *us* dispose of Hegan?"

Sickels backed up. "My trade is breaking and entering. I wouldn't know what to do with a knife, or whatever."

Dunlap had his excuse too. "Embezzlement is my speed. I can't even read an obituary without feeling faint."

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They regarded me quizzically. It is true that I somewhat remotely qualify as a torpedo. A considerable time ago I accepted two thousand dollars to eliminate one Lefty Schroeder, but the liquidation of Lefty represented the length and breadth of my career. Unfortunately, while fleeing the scene of the crime, I had the ill luck to run my stolen auto into a sedan occupied by four off-duty policemen on their way to a bowling alley.

I smiled. "I am a machine-gun man. A specialist. If you provide

me with a machine gun, I'd be more than eager to dispose of Hegan."

Obviously we had no machine gun.

Sickels finally broke the silence. "Why don't we *hire* someone to kill Hegan?"

Dunlap brought up a salient point. "What kind of an inducement could we possibly offer? Certainly not money."

Sickels pointed to his dish. "I was thinking in terms of *ice cream*. I mean that here we have every in-

mate getting only three pints of ice cream a year—on Thanksgiving, on the Fourth of July, and on Christmas. Have you ever seen *anybody* turn down his pint of ice cream?”

Actually, of course, the Executive Committee manages, through Dunlap's position in the guards' mess, to secure ice cream considerably more than three times a year. However, we regard this simply as a just recompense for our burdens of responsibility.

Sickels came to the point. “Why don't we offer the man who kills Hegan a pint of ice cream every month for the next year?”

I frowned thoughtfully. Sickels might have something there at that. What might seem of trifling importance on the outside could assume tremendous proportions inside the walls. I have seen men beat each other into insensibility disputing the ownership of a pack of chewing gum. What wouldn't they do for a pint of ice cream every month for an entire year?

Dunlap remained dubious. “Who would kill a man for twelve pints of ice cream?”

“Somebody who has nothing to lose if he gets caught at it,” Sickels said. “And we have plenty of those in here.”

Yes, we had plenty of those in here.

Twelve pints of ice cream, and

the embarrassing existence of Hegan would be terminated.

Dunlap beamed. “We'll circulate the offer as soon as we adjourn the meeting.”

On the way back to the warden's office, I took a shortcut through the laundry building. I came upon Albert Lochenmeyer in the sorting room.

Here was a man who obviously had nothing to lose. It was true that he hadn't made any try at Hegan on his own initiative, but I suspected that this was primarily because he really hadn't much of an incentive, not even knowing Hegan personally—but for twelve pints of ice cream?

“Albert,” I said. “Do you like ice cream?”

He looked up from the long table. “Sure. Why?”

I hesitated. Suddenly I felt distinctly uneasy about the whole thing. “Just curious,” I said hastily. “I'm making a survey for the commissary staff.”

I moved on. Damn it, Lockenmeyer would find out about the offer soon enough—from Dunlap or Sickels.

That evening in the mess hall, Dunlap, Sickels, and I took our usual tacitly reserved seats. We became engrossed in our plates of cabbage, meat balls, and stewed tomatoes.

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Finally I looked up. "I imagine both of you have been spreading the word of our offer?"

Sickels carefully cut in half a meat ball, which was mostly rice. "Haven't had the time. Been kind of busy today. One of the generators in the powerhouse just doesn't sound right to me and I'm trying to find the trouble."

Dunlap picked at his food. He had eaten earlier in the guards' mess, of course, but he had to go through the motions here. "I've been up to my elbows in work. Just haven't had the time to talk to anybody."

I sighed. So they had been thinking it over, too?

If we only had five thousand dollars at our command, we would cheerfully offer it all for the death of Hegan. But twelve pints of ice cream? Even for the life of a man like Hegan? Somehow it just didn't seem quite . . . *right*.

Dunlap and Sickels now looked at me.

I cleared my throat. "I think we ought to table our offer of the ice cream for further study."

They brightened.

"That's right," Sickels said happily. "Further study."

When I got back to my cell, I found Hegan—as usual, recently—huddled in the bottom bunk. He had lost some twenty pounds since

he had joined me, and the circles under his eyes had become quite deep.

That night when I lay down, I tossed and turned. I was beginning to have my own difficulties in sleeping, even while Hegan was still awake with his fear-inspired insomnia.

Finally, however, I dozed off. At three in the morning, Hegan's snoring woke me. Grimly I lowered myself from my bunk and stared down at him.

How does one go about strangling a person? Is there much of a struggle? Is it absolutely imperative that you be bigger and stronger than your victim, or would the element of surprise be enough? If I suddenly pounced . . . ?

No. That would never do. Too clumsy, too barbarian, and besides, I might fail.

I climbed back up to my bunk and stared at the ceiling.

Curare?

Was it actually possible to secure curare? Or if not that, then a workable substitute? I knew that some of the inmates working in the dispensary had chemistry backgrounds. Would they be able to come up with something?

Just a drop in Hegan's bloodstream would do. Perhaps if I placed an impregnated needle in his shoe?

Or possibly I might even use a blowgun from a distance?

I wiped away some of the perspiration from my forehead.

Or should I wait just a little longer in the hope that someone else might finally get the nerve to kill Hegan?

Suppose no one ever did? How long could I endure Hegan's snoring?

I joined Hathaway at the window.

It was late fall now and the cold wind scuttled leaves across the main yard.

The warden puffed his cigar. "So Hegan was framed after all."

"Yes, sir," I said. "I suppose he'll go back to his police job?"

Hathaway frowned. "No. Actually, he seems to have lost all interest in police work. I had a rather amazing private talk with him and he seems determined to travel. When I asked him where he intended to go, he clammed up, almost as though he were afraid to let me, or anyone else, know exactly where to find him. Frankly, he

seemed like a thoroughly frightened and bewildered man."

We watched as Hegan and his escort moved toward the main gate complex. Hegan had acquired the habit of looking back over his shoulder as though expecting to see something or someone following him.

"Well," Hathaway said, "there he goes, out into the world again. I just don't understand it, though. Why would Lockenmeyer come forward and confess that he framed Hegan? I know he hasn't got anything to lose, but what did he have to *gain*?"

I smiled.

This afternoon I'd have to go over to the guards' mess and talk Dunlap out of a pint of ice cream.

Lockenmeyer had twelve of them coming, one for each month of the next year. They were the reward I had promised him for manufacturing the confession.

It was our little secret; just his and mine.

I yawned slightly. Tonight I finally ought to be able to get a full night's sleep again.

